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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: NEW MITROVICA MAYOR PROMISES TO URGE
RESTRAINT, CALM IN COMING CRITICAL WEEKS

Classified By: COM TINA KAIDANOW FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: COM met January 22 with former PM Bajram Rexhepi, the newly elected mayor of the divided city of Mitrovica, to urge him to use his moral authority to send a message of restraint and calm to his constituents in the run-up to and aftermath of Kosovo's final status resolution. She noted that Belgrade will most likely take and encourage provocative actions in the north in retaliation against Kosovo's independence, and that it was the responsibility of KFOR, UNMIK and other key international actors to determine the appropriate response, rather than Kosovo's government or security institutions. Rexhepi fully agreed, and said he was working actively to spread this message of calm and restraint in Mitrovica. Rexhepi also said he was willing to take the initial steps needed to establish the north Mitrovica municipality, as set down in the Ahtisaari Plan, and COM recommended that he discuss this seriously with SRSG Ruecker and ICO. Rexhepi feared that Belgrade would use the water resources of Gazivoda lake, which supplies water to both north and south Mitrovica, to create problems. COM observed that the interdependence of this water system between north and south made it an unlikely target, but that KFOR and the international community were aware of the issue and would watch it closely. END SUMMARY.

Keep Things Calm in Mitrovica

¶2. (C) At a January 22 meeting, COM asked newly elected mayor of Mitrovica and former PM Bajram Rexhepi to use his moral authority to urge restraint and calm in the run-up to and aftermath of Kosovo independence. She noted that she was present last week when President Sejdiu had met with nearly all of Kosovo's mayors (Rexhepi was not present) and that she had told them that they all faced a difficult job, as the eyes of the world would turn to Kosovo in these key weeks and months. COM said that as the mayor of the divided, troubled city of Mitrovica, Rexhepi had perhaps the most difficult job of all. She added that Belgrade will undoubtedly take actions that will be provocative, likely hoping that Kosovars will react and take matters into their own hands. While possible Serbian economic measures, such as closing the

border or cutting off electricity, could prove painful, she noted, more worrying was the ethnic Albanian reaction to political steps that might be taken by Belgrade -- for example holding municipal elections in Kosovo Serb areas or solidifying the institutional makings of a Serb entity in the north and in Serb enclaves. COM told Rexhepi that KFOR, UNMIK and other key international stakeholders would be responsible for providing security in the north and determining the best way to handle these provocations, and that it was critical no one in Kosovo react counter-productively to Belgrade's own actions.

¶3. (C) Rexhepi, who is a native of Mitrovica and as a medical doctor treated both Albanians and Serbs during the conflict, fully agreed and said he wanted to cooperate closely with USOP. He was clear on the stakes involved in Kosovo's reaction to any potential Serbian provocations. To help get the message of calm and restraint out as widely as possible in Mitrovica, Rexhepi said he would like to have a small public relations staff and that he had already asked the UNDP for funding. He also promised to use his contacts within the Kosovo Protection Corps, made up largely of demobilized KLA veterans, to send this message as well. Rexhepi said that he wanted to see multi-ethnic projects to improve services for citizens in both parts of the city and was willing to talk to anyone in north Mitrovica who was interested in this. COM noted that USAID and thQU.S. government, as well as numerous other international donors, would be assisting Mitrovica -- north and south -- in a variety of ways in the coming months, and Rexhepi expressed his gratitude.

¶4. (C) Having accepted the Ahtisaari Plan, Rexhepi was keen to know when the provisions dealing with establishing the municipality of north Mitrovica could be implemented. (Note:

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Ahtisaari's plan calls for the formation of two separate municipal structures in north and south, with a common joint municipal board; UNMIK has thus far not taken action to construct the northern municipal authority, fearing in part that it might inflame the situation among ethnic Albanians. Rexhepi's initiative, therefore, constitutes a welcome opening.) COM responded that this would be an appropriate subject to take up with SRSG Ruecker and PDSRSG Rossin, and promised she would also discuss the issue with UNMIK and ICO during her own meetings with these officials. (In a subsequent conversation with PDSRSG Rossin, he expressed his own support for moving forward and said he was encouraging UNMIK's office in Mitrovica to pursue the idea.)

Fears: Territorial Integrity, Water

¶5. (C) Rexhepi said that parallel Serbian security structures in the north were a problem, and feared this could harm Kosovo's territorial integrity. He also expressed concern over the security of the large Gazivoda reservoir that serves as drinking water for both north and south Mitrovica. COM stressed that KFOR would remain present and active in northern Kosovo, and that both UNMIK's presence and the eventual ESDP and ICO missions' presence would provide continuity in the north, as well. On the water issue, COM noted that the interdependence of the water supply system between northern and southern Mitrovica made it an unlikely target for Belgrade-inspired sabotage, but said that KFOR and other security agencies were well aware of the issue and would be keeping a close eye on it.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: It is a fortunate development that native son Bajram Rexhepi is the newly elected mayor of Mitrovica. He is known and respected on both sides of the city -- his house is actually in the Serb-majority northern section. We will support him strongly in his efforts to ensure that Mitrovica does not become a potential flashpoint of provocation by Belgrade and reaction by Kosovo Albanians in the critical weeks and months ahead.

KAIDANOW